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ABSTRACT

Teachers, districts, and states working with the Northwest Regional Education Laboratory have been using a six-trait analytical scoring assessment model for student writing. The six traits are: (1) ideas; (2) organization; (3) voice; (4) word choice; (5) sentence fluency; and (6) conventions. For the last 4 years, the Northwest Regional Education Laboratory has been training teachers to teach students to be assessors of writing using the same six traits. This study was conducted to investigate the usefulness of this approach. Six classrooms of fifth graders participated, 67 in the treatment (integration) group and 65 in the control (observation) group. Teachers were taught scoring strategies and were visited by project staff to assist in implementing them. Pretest scores were very similar for both groups. The treatment group gained the most on those traits receiving the most emphasis in instruction, in proportion to the amount of time spent on them and in the order in which they were introduced; their performance on other traits improved slightly. Students in the control group improved slightly on two traits and remained at nearly the same level on the other four. One figure and two tables present study findings. Appendixes contain the student scoring guide and a scoring guide for adult scorers. (SLD)

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The Impact of Training Students to Be Self-Assessors of Writing

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The Impact of Training Students to Be Self-Assessors of Writing

Introduction

For the last ten years teachers, districts, and states have been using a six-trait analytical scoring assessment model for tracking and analyzing the quality of student writing. The six-trait model uses professional judgment to rate pieces of writing along six dimensions:

- **Ideas.** Ideas are the heart of the message, the content of the piece, the main theme, together with all the details that enrich and develop that theme.
- **Organization.** Organization is the internal structure of a piece of writing, the thread of central meaning, the pattern that holds everything together.
- **Voice.** Voice is the writer coming through the words, the sense that a real person is speaking to us and cares about the message.
- **Word Choice.** Word choice is the use of rich, colorful, precise language that communicates not just in a functional way, but in a way that moves and enlightens the reader.
- **Sentence Fluency.** Sentence fluency is the rhythm and flow of the language, the sound of word patterns, the way in which the writing plays to the ear -- not just to the eye.
- **Conventions.** Conventions are the mechanical correctness of the piece -- grammar, spelling, paragraphing (the use of indents), capitalization, and punctuation.

(A student version of the scoring guide for these traits is provided in Appendix A. The scoring guide used by adult raters is provided in Appendix B.)

During the course of using the six-trait model for large-scale assessment, we have noticed that those doing the scoring seem to learn a lot about writing. In addition to learning about how students write, they become better writers themselves. They also report that they are better able to teach writing, because now they understand what they need to teach.

For the last four years we have been training teachers to teach students to be assessors of writing (both their own writing and that of others) using the six-traits. The rationale is that if raters of writing learn so much about writing from systematically analyzing and rating it, why not pass this power on to students? Anecdotal evidence from teachers strongly supports the power of this notion; teachers tell us how much more comfortable they feel teaching writing and how much better student writing has become since systematically gearing instruction to the six-trait model.

The purpose of this study was to collect evidence to support or refute the power of this approach. The specific research question to be answered was:

Does the writing of students who have direct instruction on assessing writing using the six-trait analytical model improve more than the writing of students who do not have such instruction?

Method

Six classrooms of fifth graders were recruited for participation in the study to represent a range of learning contexts (rural/urban, size of district, size of school, student expenditures) and student types. Classrooms were located in different buildings and different school districts. Classrooms were randomly assigned to either a "treatment" (integration) or a "control" (observation) condition. There were 67 students in the integration group and 65 students in the observation group.

Participating teachers in the integration sites (plus any other teachers in the school that wished to attend) received a one-day training session in October 1992, on writing assessment and integrating the six-trait model into instruction. This training included definition of each of the six traits, opportunity to practice assessing student writing for each of the six traits, instruction in how to teach the traits to students, and plans for "mini-lessons" for each trait.

Teachers received an extensive set of training materials to serve as a resource throughout the year. Materials included scoring guides written for teachers and for students at the fifth grade level, plus sets of classroom activities designed to help students develop skills in each trait. In addition, teachers were provided with sample student essays to share and discuss with their students and strategies for successfully teaching students to become self-assessors using the six-trait model.

Each treatment teacher was visited eight times between November 1992 and April 1993 to assist in implementing the strategies overviewed during the initial training session. The first visit was a general overview session for students and the start of training on the trait of Ideas. The next two visits continued training on the trait of Ideas. This was followed by two visits on each of the traits of Organization and Voice. The final visit was a wrap-up and debrief. The final three traits (Word Choice, Sentence Fluency and Conventions) were mentioned but not addressed in any depth.

At treatment sites, teachers provided extensive instruction directly to students on the traits. This instruction included: (1) sharing and evaluating (as a group) samples of literature to illustrate strong examples of each trait, (2) evaluating the work of students from other classrooms and discussing how to improve the writing on the trait under consideration, (3) mini-lessons in which teachers covered skills with respect to each trait (e.g., how to generate ideas, different kinds of organization, how to write good leads, etc.), and (4) application of the traits to students' own writing (either self-assessment or peer review). Students were given their own scoring guides to work from. In one classroom, parents also received instruction in the model so that they could provide reinforcement at home.

Each control teacher was visited three times between November 1992 and April 1993 to determine how writing instruction occurred. Staff simply noted the kinds and amount of writing instruction provided by teachers, and asked questions about their normal strategies for writing instruction. All control sites used a process approach to writing in which students had an opportunity to write more than one draft and sometimes to share their writing with the teacher or with peers to obtain feedback. The amount of writing students did in the classroom in a week varied from approximately one-half hour to more than three hours. Control teachers were not observed writing with students. However, they did provide instruction in prewriting (brainstorming, listing, etc.). In one classroom, students had extensive opportunities to use word processing for structured assignments, and to help each other with revision and editing. Students were sometimes instructed to do additional writing outside of class. No control teacher provided direct instruction on the qualities of good writing.

Thus, the writing instruction provided in the control and treatment classrooms was substantially different. (Note: At the end of the study, teachers and other interested staff in the control schools also received a one-day training on writing assessment and the packet of instructional materials.)

Data Source and Study Design

Prior to the beginning of the study (November 1992), and at the end of the study (May 1993) students wrote essays under the following conditions: Students had three 45-minute periods to write an essay on an assigned topic. Students had time to prewrite, create a rough draft, read over the rough draft and revise, edit, and produce a final copy. Students were allowed to use dictionaries or other written references during testing, but could not confer with the teacher or with each other. Two prompts were used--expository (to elicit informational writing) and narrative (to elicit stories). The topics were written to allow a variety of interpretations and approaches. (See Figure 1.)

Figure 1
Writing Prompts

Expository: Think of the most valuable thing you own which was not bought in a store. **Explain** why it is important to you.

Narrative: You won't believe it, but here's what happened...

At pretest time, the two prompts were randomly distributed in each classroom. At posttest time students responded to the prompt they did not get at pretest time. This procedure was (1) used to eliminate memory effects that come from repeating prompts, yet (2) control for differences in difficulty of prompts. The same prompts were used pre and post to eliminate differences in prompt difficulty, yet different students received the prompts to eliminate memory effects.

Random distribution served to reduce self-selection effects and ensure that, on average, student ability didn't interact with prompt.

Pretest information was used to plan instruction in the three treatment classrooms. Since these pretests were also used at the end of the study to measure impact on students, they were rescored along with the posttests by other raters. For the impact study, we controlled for possible rater bias by removing paper identification, mixing pre and posttest essays, and randomly distributing them to experienced adult raters. Each paper received scores on each trait from each of two raters.

Data were analyzed using six (one for each trait) repeated measures (matched pre and posttest scores) analyses of variance.

Results

Pre and posttest means are shown in **Table 1** and statistical results are shown in **Table 2**.

Table 1
Means of Treatment Groups on Pre and Posttests

Trait	Group	Pre	Post
Ideas	Experimental	2.54	3.38
	Control	2.68	2.75
Organization	Experimental	2.60	3.15
	Control	2.61	2.70
Voice	Experimental	2.73	3.60
	Control	2.91	3.12
Word Choice	Experimental	2.73	3.26
	Control	2.91	3.11
Sent. Fluency	Experimental	2.85	3.12
	Control	2.89	2.89
Conventions	Experimental	2.79	2.98
	Control	2.99	2.99

Table 1 shows that pretest scores for the experimental and control groups are very similar on all traits. The treatment group gained the most on those traits receiving the most emphasis in

instruction. Performance on other traits gained slightly. Students in the control group gained slightly on two traits, and remained essentially the same on the other four.

Table 2 shows that gains between the experimental and control groups were significantly different for Ideas, approach significance for the trait of Organization, tended toward significance for the trait of Voice and were nonsignificant for the remaining traits.

Table 2
Analysis of Variance Results

Trait	Source of Var	SS	DF	MS	F	Significance
Ideas	Within+Residual	126.44	131	.97		
	Group	3.84	1	3.84	3.98	.048
Org.	Within +Residual	128.23	131	.98		
	Group	3.01	1	3.01	3.08	.082
Voice	Within+Residual	114.94	131	.88		
	Group	1.4	1	1.4	1.59	.209
Words	Within+Residual	60.85	131	.46		
	Group	.02	1	.02	.04	.839
Sentences	Within+Residual	117.29	131	.90		
	Group	.60	1	.60	.67	.414
Conven.	Within+Residual	177.79	131	1.36		
	Group	.72	1	.72	.53	.466

Discussion

It is interesting to note that student scores improved on traits in proportion to the amount of time spent on them and the order in which they were introduced. Thus, students showed the most improvement on Ideas, the trait introduced first; an almost significantly different gain on Organization, the trait introduced second; and a slightly lower gain on Voice, the trait introduced third. There was no significant difference in gains on the three traits which were not directly taught to students. This certainly lends credibility to the premise that student writing improves to the extent that we address instruction to the features of writing we deem to be the most important, and to the extent that we directly teach students what good and poor writing looks like on each of these dimensions.

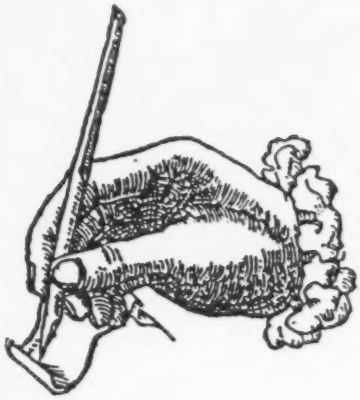
One possible objection to the study design might be, "Of course students in the experimental group do better than those in the control group; they were directly instructed on the traits used in the test. We know that direct instruction on the test will improve scores. The real question is whether writing improves." The response to this poses the counter-question, "And, how do we get this external measure of the extent to which writing improves?" The only possible way is to make a direct professional judgment of whether writing has improved. We contend that the six-trait model is the best available means of making these judgments. If, in fact, the six-trait analytical model does define what we mean by good writing, then improvements on the traits is a *direct* measure of improvement in writing. The direct, professional judgment of the quality of writing is what the six-trait model is all about. *There is no better outside measure*.

Therefore, this study does not involve "teaching to the test," it involves "teaching to the criteria." Therein lies the power and, in fact, the whole point of the technique of teaching clearly defined performance criteria directly to students. If, in fact, the six-trait model defines what we value in writing, then teaching them the traits teaches them, by definition, what good writing is. This study tends to support the conclusion that, as the result, student writing improves. Therefore, we can impact student achievement by improving classroom assessment techniques, teacher skills in using them, and student self-assessment.

Appendix A: Scoring Guide Used By Fifth Grade Students

IDEAS

–My Message–



5 Ready to share!

It all makes sense.

My reader will learn a lot.

This is what I wanted to say.

Good, juicy details!

4 On my way!

I need to add some details.

I'm working on it!

My reader might have some questions.

There might be more to tell.

3 Just beginning

2

My reader won't understand this yet.

I'm not sure what to say.

I don't really have a topic yet.

I need more time to think.

1

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ORGANIZATION

—From Beginning to End—

I know where I'm going.

I love my beginning.

My ending is cool.

5 Ready to share!

Follow me!

I see just how all the parts fit together.

I'm starting to see a pattern here!

My beginning is OK.

4

My paper is PRETTY easy for a reader to follow.

3 On my way!

Maybe I need to move some things around.

I'm not sure how to end it.

How do I begin?

2

What should I tell first? What comes next?

My reader would feel LOST!

1 Just beginning

Help! Which pieces go together?

I don't know where I'm headed.

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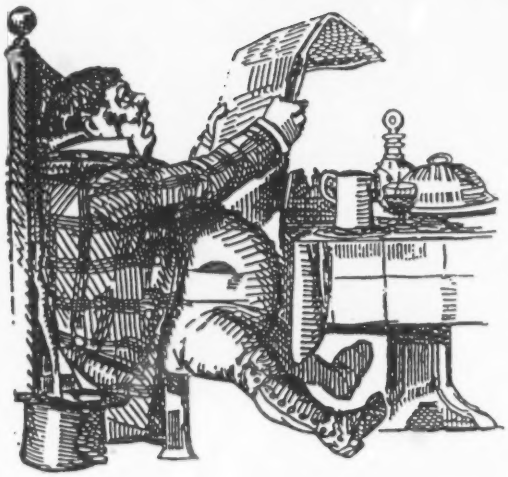
VOICE

–Putting MYSELF in my Writing–



5 Ready to share!

It's ME!!

This is what I think.

It might make you laugh or cry.

Hear me ROAR!

I love this topic.

I want my reader to feel what I feel.

4

I hear a little of me in the writing.

3 On my way!

This topic is OK.

I'm starting to have fun.

2

I don't care.

I don't hear myself in this paper.

1 Just beginning

This topic is boring.

SNORE!

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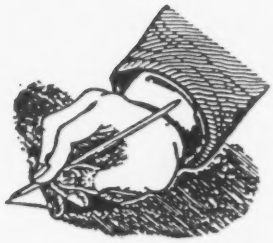
WORDS

—Playing with Language—



1 Just beginning

My reader might wonder what I meant.

I used the first words I thought of.

2

Some of my words don't make sense to me when I read them over.

These words are NOT my favorites.

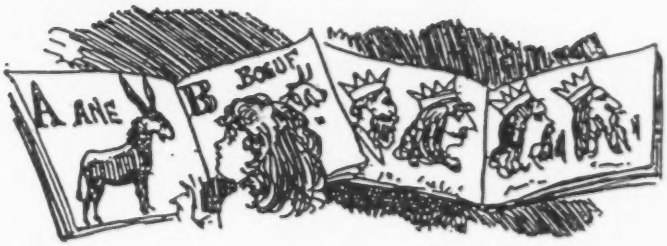
3 On my way!

I need more IMAGINATION here!!

There is probably a BETTER way to say it.

4

I like SOME of these words.



5 Ready to share!

My reader will love the words I chose.

My words paint a picture.

My words make the message CLEAR.

I think this is the BEST way to say it!

These are words I love!!

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FLUENCY

—Listening to the Sound—

5 Ready to share!

My sentences make sense.

My paper is EASY to read out loud.

Some sentences are LONG and some are SHORT.

My sentences begin in several different ways.

I love the sound of this paper.

4

A lot of my sentences begin the same way.

I wish my paper sounded a little smoother.

3 On my way!

My paper is PRETTY easy to read out loud if you take your time.

2

Some of my sentences do not make sense.

My paper is HARD to read out loud— even for me!

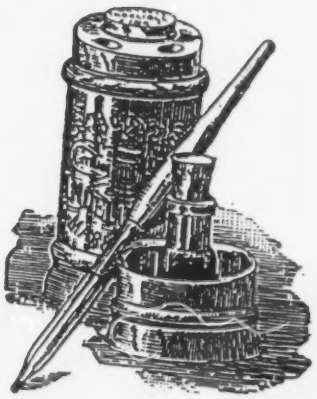
Sometimes, I can't tell where to begin a new sentence.

1 Just beginning

I'm not happy with the sound of this paper yet

CONVENTIONS

–Editing–



5 Ready to share!

You have to look hard to find mistakes in my paper!

I used capitals to BEGIN SENTENCES.

My work has been edited and proofread; it is EASY to read.

I used capitals on NAMES.

I checked my spelling.

I used periods (.) and question marks (?) in the right spots.

4 On my way!

I'm not sure I spelled all the words right.

I might have left out a period or question mark.

My paper has some mistakes, but you can still read it.

I have more editing to do.

3

2 Just beginning

My reader would notice lots of mistakes.

I have not edited my work yet.

1

I need to correct some things before I publish this work.

IDEAS AND CONTENT

(Development)

⑤ ***This paper is clear and focused. It holds the reader's attention. Relevant anecdotes and details enrich the central theme or storyline.***

- Ideas are **fresh** and **original**.
- The writer seems to be writing from **knowledge** or **experience** and shows **insight**: an understanding of life and a knack for picking out what is significant.
- **Relevant, telling, quality details** give the reader important information that goes **beyond the obvious** or predictable.
- The writer develops the topic in an **enlightening, purposeful** way that **makes a point** or **tells a story**.
- Every piece adds something to the whole.

③ ***The writer is beginning to define the topic, even though development is still basic or general.***

- It is pretty **easy to see where the writer is headed**, though more information is needed to "fill in the blanks."
- The writer seems to be drawing on knowledge or experience, but has **difficulty going from general observations to specifics.**
- Ideas are **reasonably clear**, though they may not be detailed, personalized, or expanded enough to show indepth understanding or a strong sense of purpose.
- **Support is attempted**, but doesn't go far enough yet in fleshing out the main point or storyline.
- Details often **blend the original with the predictable**.

① ***As yet, the paper has no clear sense of purpose or central theme. To extract meaning from the text, the reader must make inferences based on sketchy details. The writing reflects more than one of these problems:***

- The writer is **still in search of a topic**, or has not begun to define the topic in a meaningful, personal way.
- Information is very **limited** or **unclear.**
- The text may be **repetitious**, or may read like a collection of **disconnected, random thoughts.**
- **Everything seems as important as everything else**; the reader has a hard time sifting out what's critical.

ORGANIZATION

⑤ ***The organization enhances and showcases the central idea or storyline. The order, structure or presentation of information is compelling and moves the reader through the text.***

- Details seem to fit where they're placed; **sequencing is logical** and **effective**.
- An **inviting introduction** draws the reader in; a **satisfying conclusion** leaves the reader with a sense of resolution.
- **Pacing is well controlled**; the writer knows when to slow down and elaborate, and when to pick up the pace and move on.
- **Thoughtful transitions** clearly show how ideas connect.
- Organization **flows so smoothly** the reader hardly thinks about it.

③ ***The organizational structure is strong enough to move the reader through the text without undue confusion.***

- The paper has a **recognizable introduction and conclusion**. The introduction may not create a strong sense of anticipation; the conclusion may not tie up all loose ends.
- Sequencing is usually logical, but may sometimes be so predictable that the **structure takes attention away from the content.**
- **Pacing is fairly well controlled,** though the writer sometimes spurts ahead too quickly or spends too much time on details that do not matter.
- **Transitions often work well**; at other times, connections between ideas are fuzzy.
- The **organization sometimes supports the main point or storyline;** at other times, the reader feels an urge to slip in a transition or move things around.

① ***The writing lacks a clear sense of direction. Ideas, details or events seem strung together in a loose or random fashion—or else there is no identifiable internal structure. The writing reflects more than one of these problems:***

- **Sequencing needs work.**
- There is **no real lead** to set up what follows, **no real conclusion** to wrap things up.
- **Pacing feels awkward;** the writer slows to a crawl when the reader wants to get on with it, and vice versa.
- **Connections** between ideas are **confusing** or missing.
- Problems with organization make it **hard for the reader to get a grip** on the main point or storyline.

VOICE

⑤ ***The writer speaks directly to the reader in a way that is individualistic, expressive and engaging. Clearly, the writer is involved in the text, is sensitive to the needs of an audience, and is writing to be read.***

- The reader feels a **strong interaction** with the writer, sensing the **person behind the words.**
- The tone and voice give **flavor** to the message and seem **appropriate for the purpose and audience.**
- **Narrative** writing seems **honest, appealing,** and written **from the heart**.
- **Expository or persuasive** writing reflects a **strong commitment** to the topic, and an effort to bring the topic to life by **anticipating the reader's questions,** and **showing why the reader should care** or want to know more.

③ ***The writer seems sincere, but not fully engaged or involved. The result is pleasant or even personable, but not compelling.***

- The writing communicates in an **earnest, pleasing** manner. Moments here and there surprise, amuse or move the reader.
- Voice may emerge strongly on occasion, then retreat behind **general, dispassionate language.**
- The writing **hides** as much of **the writer** as it reveals.
- The writer seems **aware of an audience,** but often to **weigh words carefully** or discard personal insights in favor of **safe generalities**.

① ***The writer seems indifferent, uninvolved or distanced from the topic and/or the audience. As a result, the writing is lifeless or mechanical; depending on the topic, it may be overly technical or jargonistic. The paper reflects more than one of the following problems:***

- It is **hard to sense the writer** behind the words. The writer **does not seem to reach out** to an audience, or to anticipate their interests and questions.
- The writer speaks in a kind of **monotone** that flattens all potential highs or lows of the message.
- The writing may communicate on a **functional** level, but it **does not move** or involve the reader.
- The **writer does not seem** sufficiently **at home with the topic** to take risks, share personal insights or make the topic/story personal and real for the reader.

WORD CHOICE

⑤ ***Words convey the intended message in a precise, interesting and natural way.***

- Words are **specific** and **accurate**; it is easy to understand just what the writer means.
- The language is **natural and never overdone**; phrasing is highly **individual**.
- **Lively verbs** energize the writing. **Precise nouns and modifiers** create pictures in the reader's mind.
- **Striking words and phrases** often catch the reader's eye--and linger in the reader's mind.
- **Clichés** and **jargon** are **used sparingly**, only for effect.

③ ***The language is functional, even if it lacks punch; it is easy to figure out the writer's meaning on a general level.***

- Words are almost always **correct and adequate;** they simply **lack flair.**
- **Familiar words and phrases** communicate, but rarely capture the reader's imagination. Still, the paper may have one or two fine moments.
- **Attempts at colorful language** come close to the mark, but sometimes seem **overdone**.
- Energetic verbs or picturesque phrases **liven things up now and then**; the reader longs for more.

① ***The writer struggles with a limited vocabulary, searching for words to convey meaning. The writing reflects more than one of these problems:***

- Language is so **vague** (e.g., *It was a fun time, She was neat, It was nice, We did lots of stuff*) that only the **most general message** comes through.
- Persistent **redundancy** distracts the reader.
- **Jargon or clichés** serve as a crutch.
- **Words are used incorrectly,** sometimes making the message hard to decipher.
- Problems with language **leave the reader wondering** what the writer is trying to say.

SENTENCE FLUENCY

⑤ ***The writing has an easy flow and rhythm when read aloud. Sentences are well built, with strong and varied structure that invites expressive oral reading.***

- Sentences are constructed in a way that helps make **meaning clear**.
- **Purposeful sentence beginnings** show how each sentence relates to and builds upon the one before it.
- The writing has **cadence,** as if the writer has thought about the sound of the words as well as the meaning.
- Sentences **vary in length as well as structure.**
- Fragments, if used, add style.
- Dialogue, if used, sounds natural.

③ ***The text hums along with a steady beat, but tends to be more pleasant or businesslike than musical, more mechanical than fluid.***

- Sentences may not seem artfully crafted or musical, but they are usually **grammatical.** They **hang together**. They get the job done.
- There is at least **some variation in sentence length and structure**. Sentence beginnings are NOT all alike.
- The reader sometimes has to **hunt for clues** (e.g., connecting words and phrases like *however, therefore, naturally, after a while, on the other hand, to be specific, for example, next, first of all, later, but as it turned out, although,* etc.) that show how sentences interrelate.
- **Parts** of the text **invite expressive oral reading**; others may be stiff, awkward, choppy or gangly. Overall though, it is pretty easy to read the paper aloud with a little practice.

① ***The reader has to practice quite a bit in order to give this paper a fair interpretive reading. The writing reflects more than one of the following problems:***

- Sentences are **choppy, incomplete, rambling or awkward**; they need work.
- **Phrasing does not sound natural**, the way someone might speak. The reader must sometimes **pause or read over** to get the meaning.
- Many **sentences begin the same way**--and may follow the same patterns (e.g., *subject-verb-object*) in a monotonous pattern.
- **Endless connectives** (*and, and so, but then, because, and then,* etc.) create a massive jumble of language in which clear sentence beginnings and endings get swallowed up.
- The text **does not invite expressive oral reading**.

CONVENTIONS

⑤ ***The writer demonstrates a good grasp of standard writing conventions (e.g., grammar, capitalization, punctuation, usage, spelling, paragraphing) and uses conventions effectively to enhance readability. Errors tend to be so few and so minor that the reader can easily overlook them unless hunting for them specifically.***

- **Paragraphing tends to be sound** and to reinforce the organizational structure.
- **Grammar and usage are correct** and contribute to clarity and style.
- **Punctuation is accurate** and guides the reader through the text.
- **Spelling is generally correct**, even on more difficult words.
- The writer **may manipulate conventions**--especially grammar and spelling--for stylistic effect.
- **GRADES 7 AND UP ONLY:** The writing is **sufficiently long and complex** to allow the writer to show skill in using a wide range of conventions.
- **Only light editing** would be required to polish the text for publication.

③ ***The writer shows reasonable control over a limited range of standard writing conventions. Conventions are sometimes handled well and enhance readability; at other times, errors are distracting and impair readability.***

- **Paragraphing is attempted.** Paragraphs sometimes run together or begin in the wrong places.
- **Problems with grammar or usage are not serious** enough to distort meaning.
- **Terminal (end-of sentence) punctuation is usually correct**; internal punctuation (commas, apostrophes, semicolons, dashes, colons, parentheses) is sometimes missing or wrong.
- **Spelling** is usually **correct or reasonably phonetic on common words.**
- **Moderate editing** would be required to polish the text for publication.

① ***Errors in spelling, punctuation, usage and grammar, capitalization, and/or paragraphing repeatedly distract the reader and make the text difficult to read. The writing reflects more than one of these problems:***

- **Paragraphing is missing, irregular, or so frequent** (e.g., every sentence) that it has no relationship to the organizational structure of the text.
- **Errors in grammar or usage are very noticeable,** and may affect **Extensive editing** would be required to polish the text for publication.meaning.
- **Punctuation** (including terminal punctuation) is often **missing or incorrect**.
- **Spelling errors are frequent,** even on common words.
- The reader must **read once to decode**, then again for meaning.
- **Extensive editing** would be required to polish the text for publication.